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ABSTRACT

This report evaluates the effectiveness of the Urban Academy program, a dropout prevention demonstration program involving a collaborative effort between Community School District 10 in the Bronx (New York) and the Victim Services Agency (VSA), a social service agency, to provide increased instructional support and social services to 78 at-risk students attending an alternative middle school. The program combined two main components: (1) a high-interest curriculum based on a mini-school setting which focuses on a hands-on approach to architecture and the urban environment; and (2) the provision of extensive social services to students and their parents. The following topics are discussed concerning the program and its implementation: (1) student selection; (2) program components; (3) the Salvadori Program, which offers an architecture and engineering curriculum; (4) guidance services; (5) community service and student stipend activities; (6) parent involvement and education; (7) staff development; and (8) summer program. This report provides an evaluation of both program implementation and outcomes based on the first six months of its existence. The following findings are discussed: (1) the mean attendance rate for the students in the program remained stable; and (2) students improved their reading scores more than would be expected over a year's time. Recommendations for program improvement are presented. One table is included. (JS)

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OREA Report

The Urban Academy: A Dropout Prevention and Demonstration Project 1988-89

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EVALUATION SECTION REPORT
John Schoener, Administrator
November 1989

The Urban Academy: A Dropout Prevention and Demonstration Project 1988-89

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5/22/89

SUMMARY

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

In April 1988, the New York City Board of Education, Office of Community and School District Affairs, applied to the United States Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, for a $500,000 grant to fund a dropout prevention demonstration program called the Urban Academy. The Urban Academy was to be a collaborative effort between Community School District 10 and Victim Services Agency (V.S.A.), a social service agency. The program was to combine two main components: a high-interest curriculum based on a mini-school setting called the Salvadori Educational Center on the Built Environment (SECBE), which focuses on a hands-on approach to architecture and the urban environment, and the provision of extensive social services to students and their parents. In August 1988 the Urban Academy received $369,850 to implement its program. In January 1989, after building appropriate work space and staffing the program, the Urban Academy was implemented in three classes as a pilot program for 78 at-risk students.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

As part of the original grant proposal, the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (OREA) proposed to evaluate the Urban Academy's program both in terms of implementation and outcomes. OREA staff interviewed the director of the school, the coordinator of the guidance services provided by V.S.A., and the parent/community liaison provided by the district. In addition, OREA staff analyzed attendance, achievement, and implementation data provided by the program staff.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Urban Academy was to provide a focused, hands-on curriculum, based on the Salvadori Educational Center for the Built Environment (SECBE), designed to involve middle school students in architecture and engineering. The Urban Academy staff included an architect to facilitate this aspect of the program. While students' reaction to the architectural component of the program was reportedly positive, there were some difficulties in implementing it. These difficulties stemmed largely from the architect's unfamiliarity both with effective teaching methods for the Urban Academy population and with Board of Education procedures.

V.S.A. was to provide guidance and social services to students and their parents, and refer parents for continuing education services. In general, those elements of the program implemented by V.S.A. were comprehensive and well executed. Small case loads enabled V.S.A. counselors to provide social

services to all program students in the form of regularly scheduled individual and/or group counseling sessions. In addition, V.S.A. staff made home visits; held a series of student workshops, staff development workshops, and parent workshops; and referred parents to appropriate social services.

A parent/community liaison provided by the district attempted to refer parents to educational and vocational programs and encourage participation in the parent workshops. However, many of the parents already had high school (or equivalency) diplomas and/or were employed. Parent response to formal programs was poor, though they often sought help or information from the guidance team on an informal basis.

OUTCOME FINDINGS

The mean attendance rate for the students in the program remained stable, at approximately 80 percent, between 1987-88 and 1988-89. Insofar as attendance rates for at-risk students tend to decline from year to year, this stability can be considered a relative success for a program that was in place for such a short time. More importantly, of the students who improved their attendance, 60.5 percent came to school at least two weeks more than they did the year before.

In addition, Urban Academy students improved their reading scores more than would be expected over a year's time. In spring 1989, the mean D.R.P. mid-instructional score for the Urban Academy students was at the 34th percentile, and 23.9 percent of the students were reading at or above grade level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All staff members interviewed agreed that beginning parent outreach earlier in the year would improve this component of the program. The parent/community liaison also recommended introducing parent/child activities and parent orientations to increase the parents' connection with the school and help them associate the school with the educational and social service options available to them.

The Salvadori-based curriculum could be strengthened by additional staff development, especially with the integration of the Salvadori materials into the classroom. In addition, the architect working with the program should receive in-service training regarding school policies and procedures, and pedagogical techniques for working with at-risk students. As an added benefit, either one or both of these staff development activities could provide opportunities for increased communication between the architect and the regular classroom teachers.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In April 1988, the New York City Board of Education, Office of Community and School District Affairs, applied to the United States Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education for a $500,000 grant to fund a dropout prevention demonstration program called the Urban Academy. The Urban Academy was to be a collaborative effort between Community School District 10 and Victim Services Agency (V.S.A.), a social service agency, to provide increased instructional support and social services to 200 middle school at-risk students and their parents.

The grant proposal stated that the Urban Academy would offer the following activities or services:

- a focused hands-on curriculum;
- student stipend incentives;
- staff development;
- a talent search for placement in specialized gifted program;
- multi-faceted assessment of students, aimed at determining their social services needs; and
- social service information and referrals.

V.S.A. was to provide the following:

- student mentoring and peer counseling;
- student leadership activities;
- individual, group, and family counseling for both students and parents regarding academic and non-academic issues and concerns;
- referrals for students and parents to health and social services;

- assistance with family court issues; and
- parent counseling groups to determine Adult Basic Education (ABE) needs and vocational and community college aptitudes, with referrals to appropriate programs.

In August 1988 the Urban Academy received $369,850 to implement their program. From September to December 1988 the Academy staffed their program and built appropriate work space. In January 1989 the Urban Academy was implemented as a pilot program for 78 students in three classes located at an alternative middle school called District 10 Prep.

As part of the original grant proposal, the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (OREA) proposed to evaluate the Urban Academy's program both in terms of implementation and outcomes. OREA staff interviewed the director of the school, the coordinator of the guidance services provided by V.S.A., and the parent/community liaison provided by the district. In addition, OREA staff analyzed attendance, achievement, and implementation data provided by the program staff. This report presents the evaluation of the initial six months of the program in its pilot form.

The grant proposal set out the following goals to be achieved by the program:

- increase the attendance and retention of the target population to 85 percent;
- provide social services to at least 75 percent of the target population;
- increase parent contact with social services to meet specific needs of target group parents;

- increase participation of parents in school activities by 50 percent; and
- place at least 50 percent of target group parents in Adult Basic Education, vocational or career, and, when appropriate, academic programs.

It should be understood from the outset that these are ambitious goals that will take longer to achieve than the six months discussed in this report. For the purposes of this evaluation, they will be used for reference only.

II. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

STUDENT SELECTION

The Urban Academy is currently housed at District 10 Prep School. District 10 Prep is an alternative school, located on the Bronx Community College campus. It was originally set up as an alternative site for students who failed to meet their seventh grade reading criterion for two consecutive years and were then in eighth grade promotional policy extension classes. Subsequently, the number of extension students has decreased and, in their stead, the school has accepted eighth-grade students who did not get into high school and are repeating the eighth grade. Three classes of students from this alternative setting were chosen to be the pilot classes for the Urban Academy. Students who had been absent for extremely long periods of time in 1987-88 were excluded from the program. Eventually, the Urban Academy is to replace the District 10 Prep program and include seventh-grade students, specifically recruited for the Academy, so that students can remain in the program for two consecutive years.

Poor academic performance is commonly cited as putting students at risk for dropping out of school. Given the population from which they were selected, it is no surprise that many of the students in the Urban Academy had low reading scores and/or poor academic records. At the same time, according to the director of District 10 Prep and the Urban Academy, most students selected for the program exhibited behavior and

attendance problems that put them at further risk for dropping out of school.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The Urban Academy dropout prevention demonstration program combines two main components. The first is a high-interest curriculum based on a mini-school setting called the Salvadori Educational Center on the Built Environment (SECBE), which focuses on a hands-on approach to architecture and the urban environment. The second involves the provision of extensive social services to students and their parents by V.S.A.

THE SALVADORI PROGRAM

The SECBE, upon which the Urban Academy based one component of its program, is a mini-school based on a model developed by architect Mario G. Salvadori. It was designed to involve middle school students in architecture and engineering, acquaint them with the structure of the urban environment, and make then aware of their future role in shaping that environment. To this end, Dr. Salvadori and associates developed materials on the built environment which can be integrated into the students' regular course work. In addition, the SECBE model includes an architect who acts as a resource person for teachers and conducts workshop classes for students.

The Urban Academy's academic faculty included a core teacher for each of the three classes, a teacher-in-charge, and specialty teachers for math, science, and computers. Some students in the program were also seen by the resource room

teacher at the school. The architect associated with the program conducted student workshops for each class twice weekly for a double period. Architectural projects included a study of the Brooklyn Bridge, culminating in a student-built scale model.

According to the director of the Urban Academy, students reacted favorably to the Salvadori curriculum. Nevertheless, the Academy experienced some problems initiating the Salvadori model. The architect for the program was foreign-born and not entirely familiar with the culture of the students in the program. The architect was also unfamiliar with the rules and formalities of the Board of Education, which sometimes caused the program to run less smoothly than it might have. In addition, Salvadori materials were not necessarily integrated into the students' curriculum, nor did the architect necessarily serve as a resource for the teachers. Regular classroom teachers accompanied students to their workshop classes in order to provide continuity of instruction, and to enable the architect to teach this difficult population more effectively. However, within certain guidelines, individual teachers had control over the curriculum of their classes and, while some occasionally incorporated Salvadori resource material into their classes, others did not.

GUIDANCE SERVICES

V.S.A. provided guidance services for the 78 Urban Academy students. The V.S.A. staff included three social workers, each of whom worked with one class. One of these social workers also

served as the coordinator of guidance services and the liaison to the central V.S.A. offices. In addition, C.S.D. 10 provided a parent/community liaison who worked three days a week in conjunction with the V.S.A. staff, primarily with the parent involvement aspect of the program.

Though the initial grant proposal stated that the Urban Academy would provide a multi-faceted assessment of students' needs, this function was in fact performed by V.S.A. Social workers interviewed teachers about the academic needs of the students. Teachers were also asked to complete a behavioral checklist for each student in order to help the social workers develop a guidance plan for each student. Students were also interviewed for their input. Finally, a social worker and the parent/community liaison made home visits to each of the students' homes to establish a rapport with the parents, introduce the program to them, and interview them about a variety of topics so that a program responsive to the parents' needs and values could be developed.

Once this assessment was complete, each student was assigned to a social worker who worked with that student for the rest of the year. According to the V.S.A. coordinator, every student was seen for a regular guidance appointment at least once a month. Some students were scheduled for appointments twice a month, and some were seem more frequently on an as-needed basis. Every student received both individual and group guidance as part of the program. In addition, V.S.A. provided

student workshops on topics such as teen sexuality, incest prevention, suicide prevention, running away, and career awareness. These workshops were held during the school day and attended by all students.

V.S.A. social workers also worked with the parents of the program students. Total family contacts numbered 166. According to the V.S.A. coordinator, the social workers occasionally intervened with the parents on behalf of students. By and large, this intervention took the form of educating the parents to help their child in a more constructive manner. In some cases, parents requested referrals to outside agencies for social services. In all, 19 such referrals were made. No family court intervention was necessary this year.

Peer counseling and student mentoring did not get underway during the 1988-89 school year. According to the V.S.A. coordinator, these activities are being planned for 1989-90, though they will be supervised by Urban Academy teachers (with help from the V.S.A. staff), rather than by V.S.A. staff members.

The guidance and social service component of the program appeared to meet two of the goals mentioned above. Every student received some form of counseling on a regular basis, and 25 percent were referred to outside agencies for additional social services. Every parent met with a member of the V.S.A. staff, which formed the initial contact with a social service agency working with their child. In addition, parents were

exposed to a variety of social service options via workshops and referrals, whether or not they chose to avail themselves of them.

COMMUNITY SERVICE AND STUDENT STIPEND ACTIVITIES

Urban Academy students participated in a community service activity. Accompanied by their official teacher, classes worked with the Self Help and Resource Exchange (SHARE) at a food warehouse. While this activity was funded through a separate grant, the experience opened opportunities for a few students to obtain jobs that paid small stipends. In addition, the Urban Academy made arrangements with Bronx Community College to provide part-time jobs for selected students. According to the director of the Urban Academy, this component of the program did not function optimally, because the expectations of the college did not match the capabilities and work habits of the junior high school students. However, there were also some job opportunities at the Urban Academy itself which were better suited to the students involved. Students could hold jobs in the afternoon during school hours and, if they did well, could work after school for a stipend.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND EDUCATION

This component of the program was difficult to implement effectively. The parent/community liaison provided by the district joined the Urban Academy staff later than the V.S.A. staff.

Hence, the parent workshops and educational outreach component did not get underway as early as it might have.

V.S.A. scheduled six parent workshops. Topics included: Introduction to the Program (breakfast), AIDS and Safe Sex, Runaway Prevention, How to Talk to Children About Sexuality, Domestic Violence Awareness, and Crack: Symptoms and How to Recognize Them. Attendance ranged from 16 to 0 parents, with most workshops attended by a handful of parents. A seventh workshop, held in June, was an open house for parents of prospective students. This event drew 62 parents.

The parent/community liaison suggested the addition of parent/child activities as part of the parent outreach component in 1989-90. These, she felt, would be more effective in helping parents make connections with the school, and might increase participation in the parent workshops.

Much of the contact made with parents was over the telephone and involved efforts to engage them in the parent workshops or to give information about their children. Occasionally, parents also called the program staff requesting advocacy or community service information. The parent/community liaison said that approximately nine to ten parents per day came in or called her to receive some piece of information. She also stated that the guidance team often called the parents with good news about their children in order to build rapport with the parents and make them less resistant to seeking help if they needed it. It is impossible to assess how successful the

program was in meeting their goal of "50 percent more parent participation," as there was no established baseline for parent participation before the program began.

According to the parent/community liaison, many parents already had General Education Diplomas (G.E.D.'s) or were working and did not feel the need to participate in additional educational programs. Hence, only four parents were placed in a continuing education program.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staff development was unevenly implemented. According to the director of the Urban Academy, the teachers in the program were experienced teachers in their own areas, and did not require extensive training. Much of the teacher trainer's energy focused on making sure the appropriate materials were at hand, and, while the teacher trainer held several workshops on curriculum, it is unclear to what extent these workshops included training in classroom use of the Salvadori materials. The architect, who was familiar with the Salvadori program, did not appear to have received training or orientation in teaching the student population participating in this program.

In addition to the workshops led by the teacher trainer, V.S.A. staff provided workshops on a variety of mental health issues, such as teen sexuality, suicide prevention, child abuse and sex abuse prevention, and domestic violence awareness. These workshops were attended by all Urban Academy staff, including the parent/community liaison. Attendance by the rest

including the parent/community liaison. Attendance by the rest of the school staff was optional.

SUMMER PROGRAM

While not in the initial grant proposal, the Urban Academy also offered a summer program for 35 students who were recruited to attend the Academy in 1989-90. Information regarding the program was obtained by an OREA evaluator from the program coordinator prior to the program's implementation. The program was to operate five mornings a week, and combine woodworking and school maintenance with recreational and guidance activities. The staff was to include the Academy's director, a school secretary, two consultants from V.S.A., and three teachers. The summer program was not evaluated by OREA as it was not part of the initial grant proposal.

III. FINDINGS

1987-88 and 1988-89 attendance data for all 78 students in the program were made available by the principal of the Urban Academy. The mean attendance rate for the students in the program remained stable, at approximately 80 percent, between 1987-88 and 1988-89. Not unexpectedly, the attendance rate for the program students fell short of the 85 percent goal. However, insofar as attendance rates for at-risk students tend to decline from year to year, this stability can be considered a relatively successful outcome for a program that was in place for such a short time. Furthermore, almost half of the Urban Academy students (48.7 percent) had better attendance in 1988-89 than they did in 1987-88. More important, of the students who improved, 60.5 percent came to school at least two weeks more than they did the year before. (See Table 1.)

Though this was not stated as an explicit goal of the program, Urban Academy students improved their reading scores substantially. Both spring 1988 and spring 1989 mid-instructional level scores* on the Degrees of Reading Power test (D.R.P.) were available for 63 of the 78 Urban Academy students. The mean mid-instructional level D.R.P. score for these students rose 6.4 units, slightly more than would be expected in a year's time. In spring 1989, the mean D.R.P. mid-instructional score

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* OREA generally reports D.R.P. scores in terms of D.R.P. units rather than grade equivalents. The mid-instructional level D.R.P. score describes the reading level of material about which students can correctly answer 75 percent of the questions.

TABLE 1

Summary of Attendance Outcomes for Urban Academy Students in 1988-89 (N=78)

1987-88 Attendance Rate	80.5*
1988-89 Attendance Rate	79.8*
Percent of Students Who Improved Their Attendance in 1988-89	48.7 (n=38)
Of Students Who Improved, Those Who Improved by Six Percent** or more (N=38)	60.5 (n=23)

* There is no statistical difference between these two means.

** Six percent improvement represents an increase of 10.9 days, or slightly over two weeks, during the school year.

for the Urban Academy students was at the 34th percentile, and 23.9 percent of the students were reading at or above grade level.

Finally, all 78 Urban Academy students were accepted to high schools for the 1989-90 school year. While the Urban Academy did not specifically conduct a search for gifted and talented students, as described in the initial proposal, Academy staff helped several students gain acceptance into the alternative high school also based at Bronx Community College.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In its first six months of implementation, the Urban Academy Dropout Prevention Demonstration Program has been relatively successful in moving toward its stated goals. While student attendance remained the same before and after participation in the program, this can be considered an initial success in curbing the decline in attendance often seen with at-risk students. Student achievement, as measured by D.R.P. mid-instructional level scores, increased.

In general, those elements of the program implemented by V.S.A. were comprehensive and well executed. Small case loads enabled V.S.A. counselors to provide social services to all program students in the form of regularly scheduled individual and/or group counseling sessions, thereby meeting one of the program's objectives. According to all staff members interviewed, students benefitted from knowing who "their counselor" was. Parents also received guidance in the form of family contacts and social service referrals.

Efforts to increase parent participation and connect them with social services and educational programs were largely unsuccessful. Though parents used the guidance staff at the Urban Academy as a resource, relatively few parents availed themselves of the parent workshops or educational options. Again, all staff members interviewed agreed that beginning parent outreach earlier in the year would improve this component of the program. The parent/community liaison also recommended

introducing parent/child activities and parent orientations to increase the parents' connection with the school and to help them associate the school with the educational and social service options available to them.

The Salvadori-based curriculum was reported to be popular with students and produced an impressive year-end project. However, it would appear that this component of the program could be strengthened by additional staff development, especially in the integration of the Salvadori materials into the classroom. In addition, the architect working with the program should receive in-service training regarding school policies and procedures, and pedagogical techniques for working with at-risk students. As an added benefit, either one or both of these staff development activities could provide opportunities for increased communication between the architect and the regular classroom teachers.